

By Castilla

CC Castilla

12/6/23

## The Navigation of the Northwest Branch of the Anacostia River

The source of the Northwest branch is one half mile southeast of Burnt Mills. It flows in a southeasterly direction for about three and one half miles, passes about one eighth of a mile southwest of Riggs Mill, then turns south for about one half mile passing one mile to the west of the University of Maryland. It then turns and flows southwest for a mile and a half, where it is joined by the Sligo branch one mile southeast of Chillum. At this point it turns southeast again in which direction it flows for a distance of two miles. It crosses the Baltimore and Ohio railroad between Hyattsville and Mt. Rainier, and flows on until it joins the Anacostia river at a point about midway between Hyattsville and Bladensburg. The Anacostia then flows on in a general southeasterly direction, crosses the Washington Baltimore boulevard between Bladensburg and Cottage City, flows on down, passing beneath the Bennings bridge, the Pennsylvania railroad bridge, and the Anacostia bridge, flows past the Navy Yard and then joins the Potomac river down by Giesboro Point. Besides the Northwest branch, the Anacostia river is fed by the Beaver Dam branch, and the Eastern, or as it is sometimes called, the Northeastern branch.

In 1791 the channel of the Anacostia river was



superior to that of the Potomac. In fact the Anacostia was the only body of water on which vessels of large draft could reach the shores of the proposed city of Washington close enough to land goods on temporary wharves. Thus we see that at this early date the Anacostia river, or Eastern branch as it was then called, was considered of very great importance.

In a letter written to George Washington in 1791, L'Enfant (the engineer who laid out the city of Washington), said: "The harbor of the Anacostia river is in every respect to be preferred to that of the Potomac, being less impeded with ice, and never so swelled by freshets!" He said; "The channel is deeper and will admit any vessel that may pass over the shallows down below; and vessels may be moored to wharves, while they must remain a half mile off from the bank of the Potomac, because the main channel bears from the entrance to the Anacostia immediately over to the Virginia shore, and continues up on that side until it reaches Georgetown; where the good navigation ends."

In a report entitled, "A Survey of the Eastern Branch of the Potomac (Anacostia River)" written in 1891, addressed to General Casey, Chief of Engineers, from Colonel Hains, the conditions were set forth as follows. From the mouth of the river to the Navy Yard, the stream was wide and the channel though eighteen feet deep, was narrow and crooked;



so crooked in fact that a vessel one hundred and fifty to two hundred feet long, and drawing fifteen feet of water could scarcely navigate it. On the south side of the deep channel, there were large areas of shoal water or flats. Above the Navy Yard, the river narrowed until the average width was about twelve hundred feet, with a channel depth of thirteen feet. This continued up as far as the Pennsylvania railroad bridge. From this point up to the Bennings bridge, the channel was not less than six feet deep and much of the way it was nine or ten feet at low tide. ~~BA~~ Between the Bennings bridge and Bladensburg, the stream became very narrow, with a depth of less than six feet, and most of it less than three feet.

Accordingly to the Geological Survey of Prince Georges county in 1911, the river had shoaled considerably, and navigation was restricted at that time to very short distances from the junction of the Anacostia river with the Potomac. It stated that the river was not navigable above the bridge between the Navy Yard and Anacostia.

The Coast Pilot issued by the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1916, said that from the mouth of the river up to the Navy Yard, there was a twenty foot channel, from the Navy Yard to the Pennsylvania railroad bridge there was a fourteen foot channel, and that the river up as far as Bladensburg was navigable for small boats and lighters.



All of these statements seem to contradict each other, for first one says it is navigable up to a certain point, and then another says it is navigable up to a different point, and yet another one comes in and says something else. It must be remembered however, that the river bed is continually changing. It is being constantly being filled in by the deposits of silt, and then again it is being improved all the time. In fact, hardly a Congress convenes but some bill is introduced providing for the improvement of the Anacostia river.

Colonel Hains, in his first report which I have mentioned above. advocated considerable improvement of the river. The principal reason he gave for its improvement, was that there might be an easy access to the Navy Yard for warships in time of war. He also advocated improving the flats, or shoals, on the south side of the river, in order to increase the wharfage <sup>a</sup>ares of the city, and at the same time as a sanitary precaution; for the flats, partially covered as they were with fermenting sewage, and a rank growth of marsh grass, were great breeding places for the malarial mosquito.

Colonel Allen's arguments for the improvement of the river in 1898, were practically the same as those of Colonel Hains in 1891. However, although the river was navigable at that time up as far as Bladensburg. his proposed project was only for improving that part of the river which was below the District line.



Then again in 1911 a bill was brought up, "for the protection of the interests of the United States in lands and waters comprising any part of the Anacostia river and lands adjacent thereto." This bill provided for the improvement of the channel, and the betterment of the sanitary conditions of the flats, but to do this the government would have had to obtain all the land adjoining the river and flats. This would have been a hard thing to do, as in a good many cases the titles were in such a chaotic condition that it was practically impossible to trace them out. Consequently the bill was defeated.

As to whether the Northwest branch was ever navigable or not, I am unable to say. I was unable to find any information on this point in the Congressional Library, nor was I able to find out from the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey. A history of Prince Georges county states, that at the time the county was founded; there were settlements along the Anacostia river in the vicinity of Hyattsville and Bladensburg, and as far up the Northwest branch as the present Montgomery county line. This might be taken as an indication that <sup>at that time</sup> the Northwest branch was navigable. This history states also that the river bed is gradually being filled in with material brought down by its headwaters, and since the settlement of this region the river has shown an appreciable amount of shoaling. This may readily be appreciated, when it



is known that the Northwest branch alone carries down relatively twenty times as much silt as the Potomac, and that all the tributaries of the Anacostia together, deposit three hundred and forty three tons of silt per day. At this rate then, it would not take very long for a navigable stream to fill up, if it were not dredged out, and the river, as far as I have been able to find out, has never, in recent years at any rate, been improved above the District Line.

Thus we see, although it may never have been navigable, it was at one time very much deeper than it is at present.